

Making Anyway: Education, Designing, Abolition

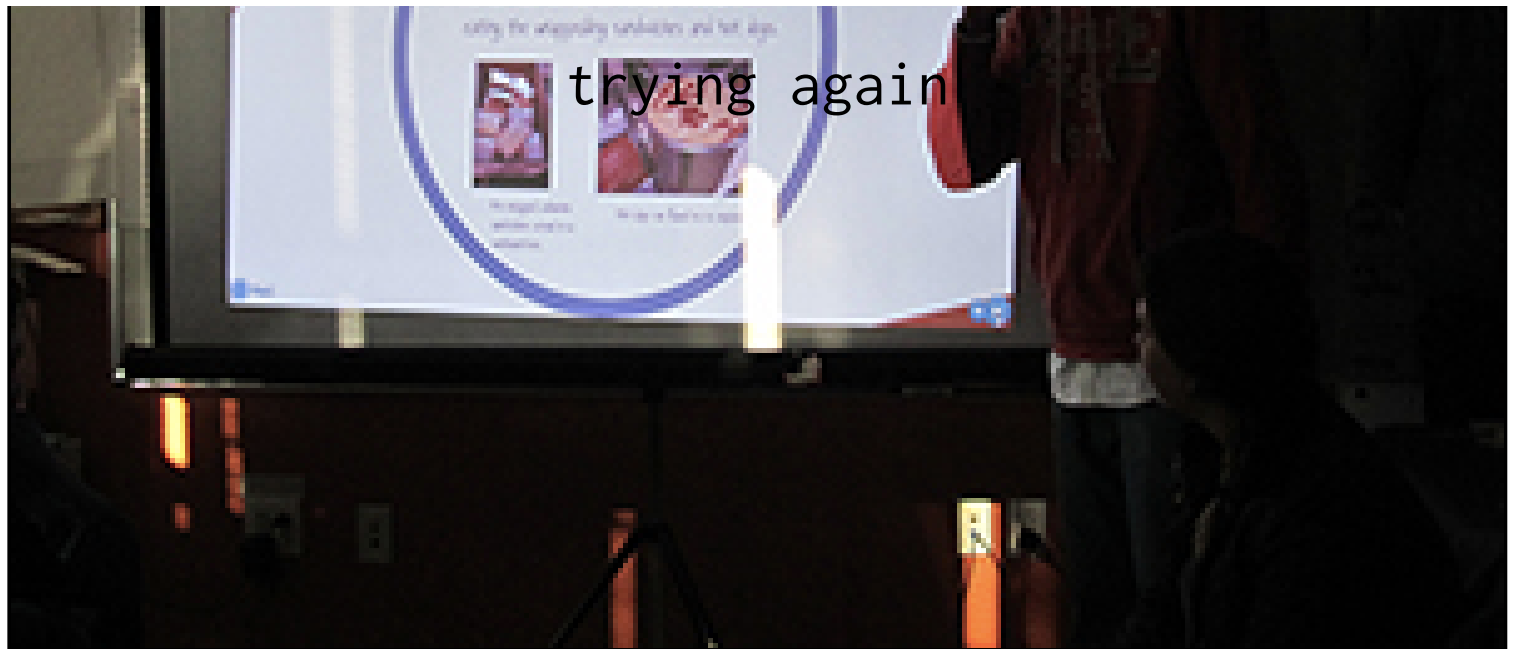
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The university where I work has a political legacy of which it is quite proud, its common sense wrangled for different purposes, from division to division of the university, contributing, or not, to the ethos and direction of the faculty, staff, and students. I doubt this is true of only my institution; while our legacy is particular it is not atypical. As faculty in the art and design school, which brings in - is expected to bring in - a large portion of the revenue to the university, I am keenly aware of the impacts of an academic shift taking place across design education, in particular, from an emphasis on industry-based professionalization and readiness to one on design as the new paradigm for liberal arts - a replacing of the critique mode of a traditional liberal arts education with the capacities for doing and making - for "problem solving" - inherent in the education and work of designers. ([This doesn't, interestingly, undo the increased focus on job-readiness that is so much the focus of higher education now, however \(harkins-meiners#universities-in-crisis\).](#))

Designers, in a manner of speaking, are right now in the practice of asserting that they (we) are ready to find the answers to the kinds of "persistent social concerns" that have been the stuff of liberal arts educations, public policy programs, international humanitarianism, and even fine arts. This move is not entirely new in design - some graphic designers in the 1960s and 1970s articulated a [sense of concern and purpose \(http://www.kengarland.co.uk/KG-published-writing/first-things-first/\)](http://www.kengarland.co.uk/KG-published-writing/first-things-first/) - social or political - for designing. Participatory Design grew out of the workplace democracy movement in Scandinavia in the 1970s, led by workers in fields where their jobs were quickly becoming integrated with a range of computer-based and other technologies. Designers aligned with this movement worked from the belief that people using these technologies should be "critically involved in their design" and made workers participants in the design of these new systems and machines.^[1] And what began as a smaller movement of designers of products and the built environment to address issues of sustainability and "human-centered design" had grown, or reemerged, by the early 2000s to begin to shape multiple fields of design (see, for example Margolin and Margolin, 2002). This has taken a range of forms, from discussions of materials use to social impacts of designed things, to, significantly, an increasingly ubiquitous focus on user-led design and [co-design \(http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ncdn20/current#.Uv-f2P205Pg\)](http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ncdn20/current#.Uv-f2P205Pg) (where designers work in some or all aspects of a design process alongside "non-designers").

Ours is now a *design-led university*. This term packages and codifies in our university identity (both in the philosophical sense and in the branded one) a kind of burgeoning confidence among designers, design education, and designing professions both to name and to take on "wicked problems." Coined in the 1960s by Horst Rittel, the idea of "wicked problems" was raised again as a means of naming the type of issues facing designers today by human-centered design advocate Richard Buchanan in 1992. It has persisted as a key framework in design knowing and processes. Buchanan described wicked problems as "a class of social system problems which are ill-formulated" and in which there are a range of people involved in both problem defining and decision-making, who themselves have a range of "conflicting values," and where both information used by designers and the "ramifications in the whole system" are confusing. ^[2] (I've written more extensively on this in relationship to what gets called "social design" or "social innovation" elsewhere. ^[3]

In deference to honesty and a kind of revealing that seems perhaps useful in order to not just fall into the practices (or arrangements) of criticism on which Moten and Harney work their theses, I should not go further in my argument without saying this: while I have perhaps a familiarly complex relationship to both design and liberal arts in the university and in the world, I also love them and the practice of them. Even as I understand the limits of both and the implications of my own role in the execution of teaching and learning in institutions (both brick and mortar and systemic) I can't shake the sense that learning (how) to think enables and even requires (ethically) a concomitant kind of learning how to make and do. In an admittedly romantic sense, I teach in part because I hope that this is what a liberal arts education and a design education might do - make it so we can, in fact, engage ourselves and students, but not only as students, in projects of making abolition and failing and trying again, producing loops that themselves produce possibilities for interruption and misdirection and reworking.



However.

Three years ago, give or take, as I was waiting for a meeting in my university I thumbed through the brochures advertising the possibilities afforded by the institution in which I work. I picked up a smart little brochure, pamphlet-sized, that announced in bold sans-serif type that prospective students should come to this school where they could "do good" and "do well."

As a part of this *Lateral* piece, this essay aims to raise some provocations and questions about the practice of attempting to teach abolition in universities and colleges that are embracing the notion of the duty of the university to the "community," and pursuing the deep institutionalization of "civic engagement" curricula and programs, all while offering the promise of an opportunity to "do good" (and do well - i.e., still get a job (harkins-meiners#universities-in-crisis)). It seems important to start with the obvious here: I learned (in college) of the feverish capacity of capital to make a profit-ready object of most any form of resistance, and it goes without saying that branding a degree whose selling point is what I'll call "do-good-ability" as a professional outcome that allows the graduate to pull down a good salary is, necessarily, of and deeply embedded in the systems in which students will engage to "make change." Add to this the entrepreneurial aspect of a number of these programs, as in "social entrepreneurship," (<http://www.echoinggreen.org>) and this interest on the part of the university seems to be poised on a teeter-totter between traditional and contemporary ideas of what purpose the university should serve (moral engagement on the one hand and job readiness on the other), with the teeter-totter being passed off as a leading edge where "good" and "well" meet. Importantly, this seems to require that no matter how much "change" is advocated and made through these educational engagements and job opportunities, for a degree or mode of engagement to remain viable by institutional standards, the conditions that tie "do-good-ability" to the capacity to "do well" not be made a significant part of the outcome . This is a good example, I'd argue, of a wicked problem.


At the same time, abolition as a political framework - especially prison-industrial complex (PIC) abolition, as articulated by Critical Resistance, a PIC abolitionist organization - is not a fixed end goal, rendered complete, for example, by decarceration or the opening of the prison gates. It presumes not only change over time, but proposes abolition as necessarily a process (<http://criticalresistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Ab-Toolkit-Part-6.pdf>) with a range of components, any one of which might be being pursued at any given time, in tandem with or separated from others, and with new strategies and tactics added as they are needed, theorized, or figured out. It is to the intersection, perhaps, of three points of argument made by my co-authors in this *Lateral* thread that I turn now: the limits to sovereignty Han argues may be embedded in Moten and Harney's proposition that "the object of abolition" is, in fact, "not the elimination of anything, but...the founding of a new society"; Harkins' and Meiners' proposal that education or college in prison (or education that takes into consideration the specter of imprisonment more broadly) might be a "leverage point" with the "potential to disrupt" ([harkins-meiners#frameworks-for-engagement](#)); and Stein's analysis of the university's roles in relation to the economics of job-production . What else might be made possible - or at least visible - in a consideration of teaching abolition in an educational system increasingly aiming to make synonyms of "doing good" and "doing well"?

Moten and Harney give us a difficult row to hoe, as it were. I am keenly aware of both the limitations of institutional critique and, alternatively, of those efforts by teachers and academics across US-based universities and colleges that are working to critically engage this institutionalization. This latter group, in which I end up including myself (<http://www.working-with-people.org>), tends to argue that the incorporation of civic engagement into university curricula requires a simultaneous commitment to challenging the power and place of the university and its relationships. And, while much of that work happens in centers and institutes, much of it happens after hours and on weekends and between committee meetings and through personal and political investments by people insisting on the need to make their own work meaningful. The intersection of Han's and Harkins' and Meiners' areas of engagement - "making" and "disrupting" - seems to open up the possibility of some aspect of this work, as it stands both inside and outside the university, being abolitionist anyway .

Still, it is critical to articulate what it actually means to name "doing good" as a graduate attribute. Because, as I hinted at above, "doing good" tends not to be rooted in an analysis that acknowledges that the systems through which, in spite of which, or around which one might "do good" are, in fact, doing things as they intend to - and producing exactly the outcomes they mean to produce. By skipping over, for example, the violence that is part and parcel of putting people in cages or putting cameras on the corner or enforcing borders of

all sorts, the graduate attribute "doing good" is inextricably tied to an obfuscation of the realities of the systems with which students are asked to engage, the very ones that produce the meaning of "doing well." (harkins-meiners#universities-in-crisis)

For example, abolitionists are not the only ones who consider that there is a problem presented by what is more typically called the "criminal justice system." With the rise in the role of design's and designer's interactions with systemic re-design, it is not at all surprising that (some) systems of punishment and confinement would begin to be discussed in these new "social" design terms and forums, in this era of complex problem solving. On the blog for the newly formed Public Policy Lab (<http://publicpolicylab.org>) in New York City, whose mission is to "help Americans build better lives by improving the design and delivery of public services," for instance, there are four projects (as of this date) gathered under the tag "Courts and Criminal Justice." (<http://publicpolicylab.org/tag/courts-criminal-justice/>)

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In one, "Designing a New Justice System," the Lab's blogger discusses how in Milliken, Colorado, "the need for a new police station provided an opportunity to redesign the service environment for the town's justice system." The police chief, Jim Burack, notes in an interview on which the post is based that "design has a big impact." The aim of the design of the complex - which includes the police station, courts, and social services - he explains, is to create a neighborhood-based police and court system that allows police to know residents and residents (alternately "customers," "defendants," "families," and "businesses") to feel like they understand what "happens there." And, as the author points out, the complex also "places heavy emphasis on inter-agency collaboration," presumably making for swifter and better designed responses to situations in which police and other services are involved.^[4]

On its face, this may seem a simple example: a police chief imagines that a better, more inviting police service complex will make residents more likely both to use it and to feel comfortable using it, and so employs design as a strategy for making such a space a central fixture of the town, located, as it is, across from the town square. And it is, perhaps, in this simplicity that the concern lies: at what point, if ever, does it become the role of the designer not to "improve" a system, but to question it, and even question the role of design in its reproduction? (When) does it become the role of a designer to design against the presumptions of the systems we may have set out to "improve?" How does that matter for the practice of building abolitionist possibilities?

What might it mean to make differently?

I want to turn back now to the university, to the example of a course I have taught for six years that is, on its face, not clearly abolitionist in its outcomes, but, I would argue, is a persistent attempt at teaching abolition. I believe that is this contradiction - or struggle - that makes it useful to the questions we, as co-authors in this *Lateral* piece, are knocking around. In brief: Over the past five years, I have worked (initially with a co-teacher, Lara Penin) with staff, clients, and students at The Fortune Society, a large non-profit that provides a range of services to formerly incarcerated people and people in an alternative to incarceration program, to consider the possibilities service design present there. The shape of the class has shifted over time. In the period between Fall 2010 and Fall 2012, it took on a more consistent form when, in 2010, a small group in my class began to focus in on using design to collaboratively define a range of needs and desires among students at Fortune, and in 2011, based on the ideas that began to emerge the year before, Fortune staff asked the class to build on this work to develop a service design that addressed the needs and desires of staff and clients to have a functional and well-used "community" space in a large open room on the second floor of their building in Long Island City. ^[5] The class focus remained on that space in 2012, and on the emerging clarity that food - access to food that specifically was not "like jail food" - was a sore spot in both the upstairs space (where the "jail food" was served) and in the capacity for building "community."

The course's key contexts are three-fold: it is a partner-based course in a university that privileges civic engagement and partnership with "community;" it is a design studio in a university that privileges design-led learning as both a route to "21st Century learning" and "doing good;" and, most importantly, it has generated and necessitated a complex intertwining of the teaching and learning goals of at least two teachers, several classes of students, and theories of both design and service provision in the totalizing context of prisons, policing, and punishment systems. In this course, we try also to contend with the political—the systemic nature of those aforementioned "wicked problems." This means thinking about how, through design practices and investigation, Parsons students and Fortune staff and students can adapt or refigure designing to explore conflicting and contradictory aspects of how ideas of 'need' are differentially defined by people in different political and experiential positions, with different relationships to power. In this way, the work done in the course attempts to ask what it might mean to use design processes as a means to highlight, question, refuse, or fight to change the very conditions in which the design work is taking place. And, what this means, is that we fail, often, in designing anything that really seems like the right thing, and try, instead, to make anyway .

I've written about this class before, at different stages in its lifecycle ([here](http://www.designstudiesforum.org/journal-articles/worldmaking-working-through-theorypractice-in-design/) (<http://www.designstudiesforum.org/journal-articles/worldmaking-working-through-theorypractice-in-design/>) and see citation below). Rather than describe specifics of the course further here, I am more interested in raising it as an experience - not only mine,

though mine is the only one from which I can reliably narrate - of designing into the open nothingness that is also somehow the *thingness*, the "there there," of unfinished work and unsolved problems, and teaching as a form or practice of un-learning, together with students and partners.*

At the start of the Fall 2012 class, I gave students a new set of restrictions: in order to increase our capacity for being accountable to our partner organization, the class was going to begin where the previous class left off, build on their research, and try to move forward to a more wholly considered and viable design proposal by the end of the semester. This meant that students in the 2012 class would be working with some of the assumptions and determinations of the 2011 class, and would also be responsible for interpreting them enough to present them to a new group of students at Fortune. It so happens that the 2011 group took like fish to water (some of them) to the idea of the context of the PIC as one that begged questions - why is it, some of them asked, that the system of imprisonment seemed to be self-perpetuating?; what would happen if we "got rid of prisons altogether?"; why did we believe that "our freedom comes at the cost of someone else's expense / imprisonment?" This appeared to be less true of the 2012 group, but members of this class excelled at engaging the ideas and articulated needs of Fortune co-design partners in their attempts to design and test a food service system that would, at least, be not-dehumanizing. The combination of these foci, accidental as they were, made for a strong set of questions and hunches that informed design proposals.

The 2012 semester ended with a design proposal presentation by both Parsons and Fortune students, whose findings and ideas were derived from the research from 2011 along with the 2012 classes' own research and the most complete prototype test we'd managed so far in the class, in which students and staff at Fortune and Parsons created a sandwich bar with a range of options for freshly made sandwiches (we're talking cold-cuts, lettuce, tomato, and onion and fresh fruit, provided by a grocery store stop on the way to work by a Fortune staff member, and cut and arranged on platters by Fortune and Parsons students who made up the actual system for delivery on the spot before some 40 people came through a long line for lunch). The presentation was attended for the first time by not only class participants, but Fortune staff responsible for managing food resources, including various "healthy eating" type initiatives. Also for the first time, there was a discussion afterwards, with questions posed both to and by these staff (who everyone in the room knew were the ones who held a kind of power to make certain changes, or not). One of the slides in the presentation, about which there was a fair amount of consternation regarding whether or not to include it, was a particularly unappealing image of a giant boiling pot of hot dogs with foam burbling all around them, taken by a Fortune student in the prep kitchen during one of our classes, which happen to fall on "hot dog Thursdays." When a Fortune student presented the slide and talked about food and connotations of respect and care and opportunities, it was undoubtedly different than if a Parsons student had done the same - the weight of the image and Fortune

students' words were not so much an articulation of a badly designed system that needed to be replaced by a better designed one, but a demand, in a certain sense, for a shift in institutional priorities.

Over these two years, the more information there was, in the form of data from a collectively designed survey and responses to design-led prompts and things gleaned from observations and conversations in both sites and with both sets of participants, the *harder* it became to propose, much less make, a designed service that appeared to meet the needs and ideas and desires expressed. We were dealing, unquestionably, with systems much bigger than us, and our interventions - as they were honed and made "designable" - became abstractions of the larger problems students in both institutions uncovered, even as they became increasingly satisfying and exciting as they became more complete.

Thus, even as we ended the 2012 class with the most finished, realizable design proposal derived from something most approximating a co-design process in my experience teaching the class (meaning we actually worked more in tandem with the students at Fortune to both identify questions and possible design ideas than in prior years), it was already evident - to me, at least - that the leverage point was not so much the strong proposal for a hot lunch system (even though it was a good proposal), but the demand for visibility and voice, if not self-determination, of which it was just one viable, designable, manifestation inside the larger controlled and contained form of one service organization in the constellation of the PIC. It is the problem of this essay, and this suite of essays, that the latter - self-determination - is so much harder to render, not to mention to design.

Instead, I wonder if this work points to a different role for design, or for the act of making as a form of rethinking, and what this means for design education and the design-led university that is one troubling object at the center of this essay. There is a concept in design of the "fuzzy front end," in which a design process is illustrated to start out a royal mess of bits and pieces that, through an even messier process, eventually wind up smoothed out and concluded in "the design." Similarly, we often describe what might appear from the outside to be a linear process of research, development, testing, and iteration, as actually a messy series of double- and triple-circuits of investigation and making and investigating again. In other words, mess is increasingly a presumed piece of any design process. But the presumption, eventually, is that in any given case study, the mess ends, even provisionally in the case of wicked problems, in a something - if not a solution, an intervention. What if, in the case of designing abolition, it doesn't, it can't? What if this messy but eventually closed circuit is, instead, wrenched open? If the thing that produces "change" is in the process, the process that leads us to not an end of something, or only the opposition of something, but the making of something entirely new, as Moten and Harney propose?

It was not planned, but also does not seem entirely accidental, that my co-authors and I have ended up using some kind of physics to describe the problems or questions around which our pieces of this larger thread circle. Sora Han talks about torque , Gillian Harkins and Erica Mieners about leverage , David Stein discusses commoning - a relation of people to spaces, resources, and meanings, and I am zeroing in on something *wrenched open*. And so this presents one more set of questions: what is it about the attempt, as an actor, to navigate not only opposing, but *making* as the response to that opposition, that throws us into motion, into relationships not of theoretical power, but of metaphors of relational force? Is it possible that trying to make something forces us into a different relationship to the meanings that surround the context of the making process or the made thing? Does making anyway allow us to push - using torque, leverage, wrenching - into different possibilities in contested space?

"Do good and do well" is the promise of a closed circuit, meanings and outcomes that are - no matter how mobile in the everyday shifts and changes of any learning or working context - fixed and knowable. It is marketable precisely because it can be made visible, because it is a closed loop on which knowledge becomes a product for use in the job market and the market for higher education. Do-good-ability is, in this sense, an evidence-based end game, perhaps well-suited for the new paradigms of universities (harkins-mieners#universities-in-crisis) and, even, new and shifting contexts of prisons, policing and surveillance (harkins-mieners#prisons-in-crisis). What happens to the liberal university's promise to prospective students that they can do good and do well, when the work of "solving" social "problems" alone cannot help but produce changes (projects, things, even ideas) that are always already adapted to political contexts as if they are fixed and unchanging at best, or inevitable at worst?

For the past several years, Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility (ADPSR) has been building a boycott on participation in the design and construction of prisons. What began as the Prison Design Boycott in 2004, is now called the Prison Alternatives Initiative (http://www.adpsr.org/home/prison_alternatives_initiative), and the initial campaign has grown to include not only organizing a boycott, but the work of one member, Raphael Sperry, using design processes to reimagine and redesign former prison sites (and prisons that are proposed for closure) for other uses, and the use of their website to offer statistics and alternative visions to those designers they seek to engage. This work is framed, as the new name of the campaign suggests, in what I would characterize as political terms: design articulating a use value in refusing to participate in prison construction so that other needs might be articulated and met (e.g., decarceration or an increase in the construction of community centers). The example from the Policy x Design Blog of the Public Policy Lab above takes certain existing conditions for granted (the utility of a police-centered public service space near the town square) while challenging or seeking to change others (the design of the building and service areas so they seem open and conducive to service-provision). In

contrast, the example of ADPSR takes as a starting place a question about being an architect, designer, or planner in a country with the highest incarceration rate in the world, and tries to reimagine not the prison, but the role of design, in the face of it.

While the ADPSR campaign is not abolitionist, and stops far short of envisioning the role of designers in making a society without prisons or the PIC, it is, I think, a useful example of how a shift in the understanding of a system - from inevitable to contingent, from individualized to systemic - can impact the idea of what design can or should do. ADPSR's members began by organizing a collective act of refusal, what we might in the terms of this essay consider an active practice of *un-learning*, and what could perhaps be an example of *wrenching open*; in their refusal to participate they also insisted upon an interruption of well-established roles and relationships that materially create one part of the PIC. By organizing for unfinished (or un-started) prisons, in both literal and metaphorical terms, the boycott, perhaps in ways reminiscent of the unfinished (or insufficient) interventions made by my class, proposes a different role for design. The metamorphosis of the boycott - the refusal - into a larger political campaign to make something different, speaks to the rest, to the role of making as a means for proposing otherwise. I do not think that I can, finally, make a clean knot of the problem, on the one hand, of the institutionalization of civic engagement and the promise of "do-good-ability" and, on the other, of the possibilities afforded by an approach to teaching that foregrounds practices of unlearning, wrenched-open circuits, and an imagination for abolition. And, it seems out of synch with the organizing ideas of this group of essays to end simply on critique of university practices. So, I want to use this small, specific example of ADPSR's campaign as a means of proposing that we continue to make anyway, that making anyway is abolitionist practice in necessarily imperfect conditions.

*Thanks to my co-author in this larger *Lateral* piece, Erica Meiners, for this important insight on this point - that we might also be re-imagining how to say what "teaching" is, by characterizing teaching as "cultivating practices of unlearning," as opposed to investing in individualized "enlightenment, additive, progress" models.

Notes

[1] Robertson, Toni and Jesper Simonsen, "Participatory Design: and Introduction," in Jesper Simonsen, ed. *Routledge Handbook of Participatory Design*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012. p. 2

[2] Buchanan, Richard. "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking." *Design Issues* 8, no. 2 (1992). p. 15.

[3] Agid, Shana. "'How can we design something to transition people from a system that doesn't want to let them go?': Social Design and its Political Contexts." *Design Philosophy Papers*, "Beyond 'Progressive Design'" 3 (December 2011).

[4] Erin Routson, "Designing a New Justice System," Policy x Design Blog, Public Policy Lab, <http://publicpolicylab.org/2012/04/designing-a-new-justice-system/> (<http://publicpolicylab.org/2012/04/designing-a-new-justice-system/>), accessed September 1 2013.

[5] This partnership is still active, and the class also ran in Fall 2013, but in an expanded project that now also includes a New York City public high school, and Working with People, the curriculum project on which I work. A food program roughly based on the one we prototype tested and designed is now running, serving people at Fortune breakfast and dinner five days a week, and the space on the 2nd floor we were asked to think about is now entirely redesigned. The extent to which the current changes are or are not directly linked to, or derived from, the work of our partnership is both not entirely known and a matter of opinion. It may be that what we *made* - concrete service design proposals aside - was the capacity for capacity, or the possibility for possibilities, with respect to the assessment of needs and priorities in a complex, layered community.

References

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